

Learning-Oriented Assessment in Large-Scale Testing

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This paper reports two presentations from the TCCRISLS 2014 which address a newly emerging area of inquiry - the interface between Learning-oriented assessment (LOA) and large-scale summative assessments. The surveyed papers propose that LOA should be introduced into summative testing to help test-takers to demonstrate their best performance. The report will also make links between the papers and the dimensions of Turner and Purpura's (2015) framework of LOA.

Hamp-Lyons and Green (2014) from the University of Bedfordshire (UK) presented their concept model of Learning-oriented Language Assessment (LOLA) in their plenary. They situate the LOLA model alongside Turner and Purpura's LOA framework with regard to assessment in talk in interaction (*the interactional dimension*). They focus on one area in particular - whether greater pedagogical validity can be brought into the assessment of talk and interaction within a large-scale speaking test, the *First*, by Cambridge English Language Assessment, a general proficiency test set at B2 level of the Common European Framework of reference (CEFR).

The authors outlined basic tenets of their concept model Learning-oriented Language Assessment (LOLA), such as learning-focused tasks in the classroom which provide scaffolding to explore and probe for the best performance (*the elicitation dimension*), teacher, self or peer assessment, and finally, immediate feedback oriented to future learning (*the learning dimension*). They then contrasted these with the principles of large-scale testing, which are disconnected from the teaching context, based on external judgments or frameworks, oriented to past achievement, and provide feedback some time after the testing event.

The authors analyzed video-recorded samples of *First* speaking tests for examples of language learning orientation from examiner to examinee which might have facilitated examinees' speaking performance. They looked for examples of body language, intonation, clarification strategies, error correction, management of turn-taking and elicitation of examinee-examinee interaction (*the elicitation dimension*). However, they found few examples in their data, and concluded that the scripted test format gives the examiner full control of the interaction and precludes any kind of spontaneous feedback for the examinee (*the learning dimension*). This asymmetrical power relationship often results in pro-forma questioning rather than exploratory, meaningful interaction, with the result that examinees have little agency during the test.

Hamp-Lyons and Green criticized the Cambridge view of LOA because it situates instruction outside the assessment model, and links assessment tasks to an external framework, the CEFR, rather than to the instruction cycle. They argue that the relationship between instruction, assessment, and learning is crucial in allowing examinees to demonstrate their best performance, and that opportunities should be created in speaking tests to generate interaction similar to that of classroom interaction (*the elicitation dimension*). To this end, they proposed that examiners should receive training to enable them to scaffold and support examinees, if needed, during the test. Another recommendation of theirs to make interaction more authentic is for a "third voice" be introduced into the testing situation, for example, by asking students to work on a tablet, which, the authors believe, would generate genuine paired interaction. The authors conceded that the data set used in the study was relatively small, and that more information is needed on examiner-examinee interaction. However, until more data become

available, they suggest development of training materials to enable examiners to use LOLA strategies during speaking tests. They believe this would foster greater engagement from all parties, improve interaction, and elicit best performance.

Saville and Salamoura (2014) looked at LOA from the perspective of a large-scale examination board, Cambridge English Language Assessment. External assessment providers are responsible for accrediting the achievement of a large and diverse testing population for future academic or professional progression, and consequently play a significant gatekeeping role with considerable accountability. Some tension inevitably exists between the purposes of these two types of assessment: that of LOA, to support learners and promote future learning, and that of high-stakes examinations, to provide reliable and equitable assessment of past achievement. Integration of the two, then, might raise concerns of reliability and fairness.

Here, Saville and Salamoura presented the Cambridge systemic approach to language education that seeks to promote better learning. This model aims to link local and national contexts with internationally recognized standards in order to promote a positive impact in classrooms. The challenge for exam providers, they argued, is to align all levels of assessment, large-scale, institutional and classroom, and link these to policy-related goals so that coherent and comprehensive plans can be implemented within the education system. Learning outcomes can then be linked to both formative and summative assessment so that standards can be met and raised over time. The authors also called for a broader view of testing impact, underlining the responsibility of assessment bodies to minimize the negative impact of large scale testing on the wider society, and maximize positive impact to create a ripple effect – what they called “positive impact by design.”

To this end, the presenters called for the need to bring different levels of assessment into alignment, ensuring that both instructors and testing professionals focus on high level goals and report performance in terms of a common interpretative framework – a common standard to understand language learning progressions. Increasingly, the Common European Framework for Reference (CEFR) is performing this function and, with its broad construct of language for communicative purposes, can be used to describe learning outcomes valued by the social world and wider society (*the contextual dimension*). Its “can do” descriptors can also provide a common language to help participants understand performance in non-technical language (*the learning dimension*).

To illustrate LOA in practice, Saville and Salamoura argued that, in a systemic cycle, the CEFR provides a common language to form a bridge between classroom and large-scale assessment. The framework can inform learning objectives of the syllabus and define the development and choice of classroom tasks (*the elicitation dimension*). The resulting language activity can be evaluated (teacher/peer/self) as evidence of learning and loop forward to the next learning objective (*the learning dimension*). Records kept can be used to measure outcomes and also to look at the processes of learning.

These two papers illustrate the tension between the objectives of the research community and large-scale test providers. Both agree that learning, instruction, and assessment should be inter-linked to promote greater language acquisition. Saville and Salamoura, however, conscious of having to document the performance of a large testing population in a way that is meaningful to the wider world, emphasize the need for assessment to be linked to a common standard. This, they claim, will exert a positive impact on teaching and learning as more information becomes available to teachers and learners on language learning progressions. Hamp-Lyon and Green’s call to embed a LOLA component into large-scaled testing is thought-provoking; however, there

needs to be more detailed discussions of how this new paradigm can introduced into paired speaking tests administered over time and space without compromising reliability and fairness.

REFERENCES

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